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me by Dr. C. Hart Merriam, Chief of the Biological Survey, from whose letter I quote: "The bulk of the contents is grass seed (over two hundred seeds of one kind, *Panicum*, and a dozen of another, *Paspalum*). There was also a blackberry seed, a ragweed seed, and four quartz pebbles."

Dendroica vigorsi. PINE WARBLER. — While at the middle eastern portion of the island I saw, hopping about some bushes and fence rails, a lone Pine Warbler which I shot. It proved to be a young female in the first plumage.

Bartramia longicauda. BARTRAMIAN SANDPIPER. — A nest containing three eggs was found at Tuckernuck Island, June 22, 1896. It was located on the ground in a small bunch of grass, and was well concealed. The bird flew off the nest. I am told that the young leave the nest as soon as they are able to run.

Merganser serrator. RED-BREASTED MERGANSER. — One of my old shooting companions informed me that he saw thirteen Red-breasted Mergansers, in a flock at West Hampton, Great South Bay, Long Island, N. Y., July 29, 1891. They were in moult and could not fly. I think it probable they were birds that had been too badly wounded early in the season to migrate. — GEORGE H. MACKAY, *Nantucket, Mass.*

The most General Fault of the A. O. U. Check-List. — This is a serious matter which I have hitherto refrained from bringing up, partly on account of its hopelessness, in the present arrangement and numbering of the species, partly because it is to some extent a question of ornithological expertness regarding which opinions may reasonbly differ. But now, having occasion to retraverse the whole ground of North American ornithology, in the preparation of the Fifth Edition of my 'Key,' the blemish I shall point out obtrudes itself continually upon my attention; I cannot longer maintain the reticence I have hitherto preserved without seeming to condone the impropriety by tacit acquiescence; and I desire to put myself upon record in the matter, lest my silence be imputed to unrighteousness. This is the first general protest I make public on certain subjects concerning which I was often found in a more or less respectable minority of two or one, when various questions were put to vote for the official decision of the Committee over which I had for many years the honor to preside.

When we decided to embody the expression of our classificatory and nomenclatural wisdom in the concrete form of a Check-List, the question of the most eligible linear sequence of species, genera, and higher groups of course came up at the outset. All lists of our birds had before proceeded in time-honored fashion from the higher to the lower groups; and this high to low method had been invariably intended and implied, whether the Raptores or the Passeres were in fact considered highest. We proposed to reverse this order, and go from low to high — in other words, to turn such previous lists as those of Baird, Coues, or Ridgway "hind part before"; which proposition was carried into effect. I favored

and voted for it then, and heartily applaud it now; for, if not the most convenient, it is the most logical and biological procedure to pass from the 'lowest,' *i. e.*, the most generalized forms to those which are the most specialized, or 'highest'; such being apparently the 'natural' course of evolutionary processes. I also think we did the business well, on the whole; nobody doubts that our List passes from bottom to top of the avian series, about as smoothly as the families could be arranged in any single linear sequence — understanding, of course, that *no* one linear arrangement can possibly be natural, yet that *some* one such is a mechanical necessity of book-making.

Granting then, that we turned the series of orders and families hind part before in the best possible manner, or at least in a manner free from obvious objection, a very queer inconsistency crops up in our treatment of the *contents* of the numerous families. The same rule of reversal should of course have been applied to the genera and species of each family. But in point of fact such rule was not applied, in all instances at any rate. To put the case in a nutshell, we turned the list of families hind part before, but generally left the sequence of genera in each family as they had been in the previous lists I have named, which were modeled on the high to low principle. That this is a fact, anyone can satisfy himself by inspection of our Check-List; but the agitated searcher for light on this point may have to go through the whole of our work, before the full magnitude of our offence dawns upon him. I will put him on the track by citing a single case of what I mean, and he may follow up the investigation to any extent he pleases.

In the family Anatidæ, the general treatment of the subfamilies and genera had been, in those lists which went on the high to low order, to begin with the Swans or Geese, Anserinæ or Cygninæ; go on to the Anatinæ, which in fact inosculate with Anserinæ through the Shelldrake group, etc.; pass thence to the Fuligulinæ; and finish with the Merginæ. We use these identical subfamilies, and, as I think, advisedly; we also have after a fashion reversed their sequence, so that my criticism is to some extent weakened in this very case. But no one doubts the specially close connection of Merginæ with Fuligulinæ; assuredly these two subfamilies should come together. Instead of that we begin, correctly, with the Merginæ, as the 'lowest' members of the family; then jump directly to the Anatinæ; begin the Anatinæ with *Anas*, at the top of the list, and run the gamut of its genera from 'high to low,' in the good old-fashioned way; put *Aix* far from its obvious and undisputed position; pass on to Fuligulinæ and run *down* that list of genera to the Scoters, Eiders, and Erismaturine genera; whence we jump again with admirable agility but questionable propriety to the Geese proper, Anserinæ, and so on to the Cygninæ.

I am not here raising any real taxonomic question. I assume that we are in substantial agreement of opinion as to the natural relationships of the subfamilies of Anatidæ, but contend that their sequence in our List

violates that consensus — does not express our views. In this particular case, the sequence of subfamilies should have been Merginæ, (*Erismatura*, as perhaps type of another subfamily Erismaturinæ), Fuligulinæ, Anatinæ, (*Aix? Dendrocygna?*), Anserinæ, and Cygninæ.

This I regard as the most general fault of the A. O. U. Check-List — reversal of sequence of families, coupled with non-reversal, as a rule, of the sequence of genera within the families. If my criticism be pertinent, the case is of course incurable; the fault runs through and vitiates the whole performance as a constitutional vice which can only be eradicated by tearing the List to pieces and putting it together again in better form. The sooner we do this, the better for the good name of the A. O. U. among ornithologists of mature judgment.

The numeration of our species and subspecies, which we fondly hoped would be a fixture forever, already shows signs of that mutability which is incident, alas! to all human affairs. The numbers are already mixed up by transfers, changes of *a*, *b*, *c*, etc., or defective by eliminations, or redundant by additions. Confusion has begun already and now threatens to defeat measurably the purpose of those numbers. Several species and subspecies are no longer identifiable by the numbers they bear, for their numbers have been changed. Again, our system of numbering does not permit us always to interpolate additions to the list in the places where they belong. Take the genus *Melospiza*, for instance; or *Otocorys* (I refuse to write "*Otocoris*," as the birds are not bugs). The subspecies of *Melospiza fasciata* were lettered *a*, *b*, *c*, etc., to the best of our ability, in what seemed their proper order, at the time when only a certain number of them were known, but when certain other groups of subspecies came up, we had no alternative to tacking them on in the order of their discovery, not being able to interpolate them in their obviously proper places, without throwing *a*, *b*, *c*, etc., out of alphabet. It is true that some of these so-called 'forms' of *Melospiza* are figments of the imagination — airy nothings to which we have chosen to give 'local habitation and a name'; but this fact does not do away with the objection I raise, that they have entered our List out of their obvious proper order.

It is earnestly to be hoped that both the extant editions of the Check-List may be officially cancelled and formally repudiated in the near future; both being then superseded by a third List, drawn up anew. — ELLIOTT COUES, *Washington, D. C.*